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SUBJECT: OPIUM ERADICATION AND THE DECIMATION OF VILLAGES
IN THE WA TERRITORIES

¶11. Summary: The fate of Song Keh, a village that was forcibly relocated in 1999 as part of the Wa opium eradication program, illustrates what may happen more broadly in the Wa territories as the Wa push forward with their program. Left to fend for itself with only minimal supplies, almost one-quarter of the village's population died within a period of less than 3 years. Picked up by UNDCP as emergency case when it was on the verge of returning to opium farming, Song Keh is now slowly recovering from the trauma of the experience. However, UNDCP does not have the resources or the mandate to deal with the thousands of villages and hundreds of thousands of villagers who will be affected by Wa efforts to fulfill their pledge to make their territories opium-free by 2005. As matters stand now, many villagers will pay for that program with their lives -- a fact that has caught the attention of Aung San Suu Kyi, among others in Burma. End Summary.

¶12. Nothing illustrates the human cost of the Wa opium eradication programs so well as the fate of Song Keh, a Wa village that was forcibly relocated to the Nam Lwe valley (in northern Shan State, near the border with China) in 1999. A village of about 480 mostly Christian Wa, Song Keh was originally located north of Pang Sang near Mong Maw in one of the thickest opium growing regions of the Wa territories. Relocated to Nam Lwe, the villagers were given essentially the same support given all resettled villagers by the United Wa State Party -- a stretch of wooded bottom land, 6 months of food, building materials for their houses, some basic medicines, and, in the case of Song Keh, 10 buffalo to help with the initial plowing.

¶13. However, in Song Keh's case, as in the case of many relocated villages, the supplies proved sadly inadequate, leaving the village at the close of 2001 on the verge of collapse. By October 2001, when Poloff first visited the village, the population had dwindled to only 373 as death had claimed almost ten percent of villagers each year since the time they were relocated. Forty-two died in 1999, 36 in 2000, and 30 in 2001, with most deaths coming from malnutrition, complicated by severe anemia, chest infections, and intestinal diseases. Village food production amounted to only about 10 percent of the village's annual needs and, even supported by income from other jobs, villagers faced a food deficit equivalent to four to six months of annual consumption. In short, they were condemned to starve. The original buffalo had all been slaughtered, there was no clean water source or sanitation facilities for the village and, out of desperation, most had moved back into opium cultivation. Virtually all of the village's 67 acres had been seeded in opium for the 2001/02 crop year in an effort to generate cash for food.

¶14. That decision, in turn, nearly proved to be the death knell for the village. As it turned out, Song Keh's fields lay exactly in the middle of an area that the Wa and UNDCP's Wa Alternative Development Project had designated as an opium free area. Consequently, when the village's crop blossomed, it was quickly felled by a joint Wa/UNDCP eradication program in February and March 2002.

¶15. Fortunately, UNDCP did not leave the matter there, but put together a program for the critically stricken village. This included deployment of a mobile health team, child immunization, the distribution of mosquito nets, and the construction of new water points and toilet and sanitation facilities. Clothes and rice (about 19 tons) were handed out on an emergency basis. Seeds for summer and winter crops were also distributed. A school was built, classes started, and plans laid for the installation of three low-lift pumps for irrigation, as well as a new rice storage facility.

¶16. The entire program cost less than \$20,000, but the effects were immediate. By November 2002, when Poloff visited again, village deaths had dropped by two-thirds to only 11 in the year to date; 42 children are in school; all the village children have been vaccinated; and there is no opium. All of the village's 67 acres have been seeded in food crops for the 2002/03 winter season.

¶7. Song Keh is, of course, an extreme case. It was only one of 13 villages that were relocated from areas north of Pang Sang to areas around Mong Hpen in 1999 and 2000 and, while there was suffering in all, none of the others ended up in the desperate straits that developed in Song Keh. That said, Song Keh is as vivid example as one will ever find of what can happen when villages are forced out of opium production without sufficient economic support.

¶8. For the Wa territories, of course, this is critical. Over the next three years, the territories as a whole are to complete a transition to opium-free status, essentially as a result of Burmese and Chinese political pressure. Several thousand villages with a population of between 300,000 and 400,000 people will be affected. As of now, however, only those resident in the Wa Alternative Development Project area (about 40,000 people) will receive any support at all (and that only to the end of 2003). The rest will essentially be left to fend for themselves or to the mercies of the Wa's relocation program. In either case, many will die.

Comment

¶9. Two points are worth stressing about this situation. First, the risks that the Wa are taking with their own population gives some sense of the pressure they are under from both the Burmese and the Chinese to get out of opium. While the Wa have never been cautious about spending lives for the sake of real strategic objective, the fact that they are willing to spend lives in this cause gives a sense of its importance to them.

¶10. Secondly, someone will pay for the elimination of opium in the Wa territories and Burma more generally. It is not a cost-free exercise. As matters stand now, most of those costs will be borne by upland villagers who have few options other than opium production. (Aung San Suu Kyi made this exact point to the Chief of Mission and Poloff on December 2.) The Wa authorities and the Government of Burma may kick in some support, but, as Song Keh's experience demonstrates, it is hardly likely to be enough. The international community, which will benefit most from the elimination of opium here, could also help. However, as yet, there is no sign that the international community will act on a scale sufficient to prevent a tragedy, essentially because of sensitivities about work with the Wa in Burma.
Martinez